

P.S.

The mental moral muscle

EVERYBODY has a conscience. We might speak of a 'natural conscience'—a 'natural' sense of right and wrong, and an inherent desire to distinguish between the two—that exists in human beings, at least at some level. We might assume that to have this sense is part of what it is to be human, like being able to speak, to think, to appreciate artistry, and so forth. Knowledge of good and evil, *at some level*, is one of the defining, inherited characteristics of humanity in its present state.

But at what level? Most people agree that it is 'wrong' to commit rape or burglary. The 'natural' conscience that most people have speaks fairly clearly on this (despite the fact that neither crime is particularly uncommon in a global perspective). But it is easy to divide people quickly with respect to their consciences. There are finer points than rape or burglary (how fast one should drive, what is acceptable treatment of one's partner or children) where the range of responses to a given moral dilemma might vary considerably. It is not difficult to drill down to areas of moral ambiguity for society.

What lies behind those differing responses, those infinitely varied forms that the 'natural' conscience can take? Psychologists and sociologists try to explain people's responses to the moral questions they encounter. To understand the inputs that go into building and moulding that conscience is a very complex matter. Education, social class, home environment, attitudes of parents, ethnicity and cultural heritage, personal experience of life—each of these plays a considerable part. We are not immune to these influences as believers, either, despite our reliance on the Word of God. It is worth being aware of this. We would be naïve if we were to think that Scriptural wisdom had been the only input into many of the decisions that we make.

Nevertheless, as believers, we accept a greater moral authority than the 'natural' conscience. We realise how inadequate it is for humans to make their own decisions on these matters, for the difference between your opinion and mine is just too great to provide a stable moral basis for life. There are too many contradictions between the infinity of 'natural consciences' that we find out there in the world. Man can't make his own mind up in such a way that another will agree, and so we must turn to God to discover how to live. So the natural conscience by itself will not do. The conscience must be educated

so that it acts in a Christlike and Scriptural way rather than an arbitrary or inherited way. It is not necessarily good enough to regard something as right or wrong because that is how people usually regard it. The conscience must be shaped, trained and honed. In that way it's a kind of mental moral muscle that requires exercise and training.

This is picked up in Hebrews 5:14. Those who by means of use (use of the Scriptures, the meatier parts, and use of their conscience) are mentally and spiritually exercised will be able to discern between good and evil. Their eyes will be open because the Scriptures (and the practice of living according to the Scriptures) will have revealed to them the right way to go. So we each have a central responsibility to develop our conscience by training it according to the Scriptures, so that we will be better able to face the moral choices presented by daily life. It is one of the key reasons why we should daily read the Word of God.

There is one other Scriptural passage I would like to discuss with respect to the conscience. It is 1 Timothy 4:2, where Paul writes of those whose conscience has been "seared with a hot iron". The metaphor builds on the medical technique of cauterising used at that time. If a wound would not stop bleeding it could be cauterised by branding it with a hot iron. All well and good (if painful), except for the fact that you would never feel anything in that part of your body ever again because the hot iron would have destroyed all the nerve endings. In other words, the conscience can be seriously (the image suggests irreparably) harmed if it is not looked after and treated with respect.

The upshot is this. If you behave with scant disregard to your conscience (charging ahead in sin when you know it's wrong, and in spite of the little voice inside your head telling you so), then over time the conscience will be harmed and ultimately destroyed with respect to that particular activity. The voice of conscience starts to croak, and ultimately stops transmitting altogether; you've disobeyed it too many times before, and it seems like you got away with it. If you're not going to listen to your conscience, then why should it bother speaking to you? Where the conscience is concerned, both exercise and training, but also care and due diligence, must be the order of the day.

Mark Vincent